

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *Little Heathens*

Author: Mildred Armstrong

Born March 17, 1922, in Benton County, IA;
married Harry Kalish; Reside Cupertino, CA

Name: Mildred Armstrong
Born: 1922



Career:

From early on, I was eager to be self-supporting and independent. The summer I turned thirteen I became the companion, cook and caretaker of a retired missionary. Later I worked as a hired girl on two local farms. After my high school graduation, I earned an Elementary Teacher's Certificate from Iowa State Teacher's College at Cedar Falls. However, instead of accepting a teaching position in Iowa, I jumped at an opportunity to move to New York as a governess in Yonkers.

In 1942, I joined the United States Coast Guard Women's Reserve. I was sent for radio training to Miami University at Oxford, Ohio and on graduation I served at the headquarters of the 5th Naval District in Norfolk, Virginia. This is where I met and married fellow radio operator Harry Kalish. Thanks to the G. I. Bill, we both furthered our education at and graduated from the State University of Iowa (photo). We have two sons, two daughters-in-law (par excellence), four grandchildren and one great-granddaughter. I am a Professor Emeritus of English retired from Suffolk County Community College on Long Island. I have taught at the State University of Iowa at Iowa City, the State University of Missouri at Columbia, and at Adelphi University in Garden City, NY.



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Reviews:

Booklist, May 2007

This unpretentious yet deeply intelligent memoir of growing up on a central Iowa farm in the throes of the Great Depression radiates the joy of a vanished way of life as Kalish recounts what appear to contemporary eyes as unendurable deprivations. Those who share Kalish's midwestern farm background will immediately identify with her recollections of winter nights spent under layers of quilts in unheated bedrooms. Others for whom agrarian life is uncharted territory will learn both the harsh rigors of days governed by unforgiving work cycles and the irreproducible sensual pleasure of savoring a just-picked, sun-drenched, ripe strawberry or tomato. In prose that never yields to mawkish sentimentality, Kalish details the roles of family, religion, thrift, and education in her upbringing. The complexities of wash-day chores will bring up short those who know only today's appliances. Kalish's disquisition on outhouse etiquette will simply amaze those accustomed to their own bathrooms.

Publishers Weekly, May 29, 2007

Kalish's memoir of her Iowa childhood, set against the backdrop of the Depression, captures a vanished way of traditional living and a specific moment in American history in a story both illuminating and memorable. Kalish lived with her siblings, mother and grandparents-seven in all-both in a town home and, in warmer weather, out on a farm. The lifestyle was frugal in the extreme: "The only things [my grandparents] spent money on were tea, coffee, sugar, salt, white flour, cloth and kerosene." But in spite of the austere conditions, Kalish's memories are mostly happy ones: keeping the farm and home going, caring for animals, cooking elaborate multi-course meals and washing the large family's laundry once a week, by hand. Here, too, are stories of gossiping in the kitchen, digging a hole to China with the "Big Kids" and making head cheese at butchering time. Kalish skillfully rises above bitterness and sentiment, giving her memoir a clear-eyed narrative voice that puts to fine use a lifetime of careful observation: "Observing the abundance of life around us was just so naturally a part of our days on the farm that it became a habit." Simple, detailed and honest, this is a refreshing and informative read for anyone interested in the struggles of average Americans in the thick of the Great Depression.



Discussion Questions (1)

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1. *Little Heathens* recounts an adult woman's memories of a childhood long past. What is the difference between a child's perspective and an adult's? How did Kalish's understanding of the world change as she grew older? Are there some ways in which her approach to life is still the same now as when she was a child?
2. How did Kalish's memoir enhance your understanding of the Great Depression? What differences existed between farmers and city dwellers who lived through it? What legacies of this time period exist in your family?
3. Which of Kalish's relatives was most memorable to you? Was there an Aunt Belle in your childhood? Who plays that role for the next generation?
4. How would you characterize the dynamics within Kalish's large family? How was peace kept? What accounted for the contrasts between her relatives who were indulgent and those who were frugal?
5. What comparisons can you make between men's and women's roles during this period in American history? What did Kalish's mother teach her about what a woman could expect of life?
6. Discuss the economic realities that defined this era. What determined who would manage to get by and who, like the families she describes, would lose their farms altogether? What attitudes toward money was Kalish taught to develop?
7. Kalish describes the longevity of many of her ancestors, who relied on home remedies rather than emergency rooms for treatment. She also describes the presence of cream in most of her family's meals, and the availability of glorious fresh-baked desserts that would be strictly forbidden on a contemporary weight-loss plan. What keys to health and wellness does her memoir provide?
8. What did it take to fit in within this Iowa community? Which children and adults were accepted, and which ones might be subject to pranks or gossip? How did Kalish's experience at school compare to that of a student at one of the large public schools that now replace her classroom?
9. How did you react to the discussions of food preparation featured in the book—from regulating the stove temperature to slaughtering—and cleaning—the main course? What were the benefits and shortcomings of such a labor-intensive use of fresh ingredients, and of life without supermarkets? Did any aspects of Kalish's Depression-era cuisine surprise you?
10. In the end, Kalish tells us how she was able to journey far from the farm and build a life in urban areas. What distinguishes those who remained on the farm from those who left it?
11. Had you realized that the rural electrification bill was not passed until Roosevelt's presidency? How did it shape a community to live at the mercy of the seasons, without electricity or indoor plumbing? What was Kalish's relationship with the natural world like?
12. Discuss the role of religion in this community. What did the hierarchy of religions described by Kalish indicate about the populations who lived in her area? What were the foundations of faith within her family?



Discussion Questions (2)

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(continued)

13. Early on, Kalish tells us that her mother was a single parent, and that the story of her absent father was rarely mentioned. How did her family compensate for her absent parent? How did her mother's experience of single motherhood compare to that of parents in similar situations today?
14. Could your family endure the way of life described in the book?
15. What is gained and lost in a world that favors technology over manual labor?
16. Discuss the title of Kalish's memoir. Which of her extended family's antics made you laugh the most? How have the standards for naughty "little heathens" changed since she was a child?
17. What stories would you include in your memoir? What aspects of history does your life capture?



Little Heathens

Contents and Sign-out Sheet

Kits include one bag, 10 books, and a pocket folder of materials. Use this sign-out sheet to keep track of who takes which copy of the book. Groups may keep the folder when returning the books and bag.

Copy	Name	Returned
1	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
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7	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>

Due Date:



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